Brueys was in the Adriatic with a force able, it was believed, to meet even the English. By clever diplomacy the Spaniards and Neapolitans had been set to neutralize each other. With time the latter had grown bold, and were making extortionate demands. The Directory offered to send five thousand French soldiers to reinforce the Spanish army which was contending with Portugal, if an equal number of the Spanish troops in Italy would mingle with the French soldiers to conquer the Papal States. The latter would then be given to the Duke of Parma, in return for his old duchy, which was to form part of the new republic.

In this far-reaching design of Bonaparte's — a plan which comprehended the whole basin of the Mediterranean, and which, by throwing French troops into Spain, opened the way for further interference in that peninsula — lies the germ of all his future dealing with the Castilian monarchy. The focal point of the whole system, he had explained as early as May, was the island of Malta, the citadel of the Mediterranean. The grand master of the Knights was at the point of death; the King of Naples claimed the island as an ancient appanage, but a German was the most prominent of his order among the candidates for the succession. Bonaparte's proposal was that the Maltese should first be bribed to revolt, and that then the French or Spanish fleet should seize Valetta, compel the election of a Spaniard, and thus secure a bulwark in the heart of the Mediterranean against Turkey on one side and England on the other.

Such were some of the summer's avocations; its real business was supposed to be the conclusion of a peace with the empire. But Austria was far from being exhausted, and her agents protracted the negotiations while the Vienna government was recruiting its forces, hoping all the time for a triumph of the royalist party